

Guardsman reflects on her incredible journey

By Air Force Capt. Penny Ripperger
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Not many people would consider themselves lucky when they get cancer. Fewer would look at their experience as an inspirational journey filled with an array of vivid memories and life lessons. And only the exceptional few would find humor in their illness.



Senior Airman Theta Olson is the exception.

She won her battle with cancer, but that's not the story here. It's how this 21-year-old overcame a life-threatening illness with spunk and dignity, never missing a moment to laugh.

The diagnosis

"I deployed to Kuwait in May. It was about my second or third week there, and I rubbed my shoulder and felt a large lump. At first I thought it must be from my gear, but it didn't hurt like a normal muscle knot, so I thought I better get it checked out," Olson said.

A physician assumed it was some sort of bug bite and gave her a week's worth of antibiotics.

"I thought the antibiotics were overkill. I'm thinking, 'I'm fine, it's just some lump. I don't need to take this,' but I took the antibiotics anyway and the lump never went away," Olson said.

Next, she was sent to a nearby Navy hospital to get an ultrasound.

"This Marine had his leg amputated. He was in a lot of pain, but the whole time he was joking with the nurse that he wanted his prosthetic leg to be turned into a 'machinegun leg' so he could go back to the fight"

"After the ultrasound the doctor told me he thought it might be lymphoma. I said 'lymp-what?' I had no idea what that even was. I thought it was some type of cold or something," Olson said.

The doctor encouraged her to be medevaced to Germany for more tests. Olson was hesitant.

"I was excited about being in Kuwait and I didn't want to go back. I had just finished my training and unpacking. I had worked hard to get to where I was and it was my time to shine," Olson said. "I think I was also in denial. I wanted to be ignorant and play it off like nothing is happening, that these people don't know me, they're just exaggerating."

She requested a second opinion, and to her dismay, the second doctor agreed that she should go to Germany for more tests. Still not completely sold on the idea of leaving Kuwait for Germany, the civil engineering commander finally convinced her to return home.

Olson was medevaced to Landstuhl, a military hospital near Ramstein Air Base in Germany. She described her experience there as "insanely awesome." Tests were performed with no lines, no waiting. It felt like VIP treatment.

She was feeling optimistic and no one thought she had cancer. She was too young, too healthy. With the exception of the lump, she had none of the signs that typical patients have. Even the medical professionals who were giving her tests expressed doubts, but soon her optimism would face its first real test.

"I was walking back from chow and I saw my doctor waiting for me by my barracks. As soon as I saw him, my heart sank. I knew he wouldn't be meeting me like this if it wasn't bad news. I was with some friends and he asked to see me alone, but I wanted him to tell me the news with my friends near me, so he did. He told me I had Hodgkin's Lymphoma and that I was about to begin an incredible

journey," Olson said.

The trip home

Olson boarded the rotator to take her back to the United States on June 28, 2009. It would be on this flight that she would meet military members of all branches with varying degrees of injuries.

One person she remembers fondly is a Marine who sat by her.

"This Marine had his leg amputated. He was in a lot of pain, but the whole time he was joking with the nurse that he wanted his prosthetic leg to be turned into a 'machinegun leg' so he could go back to the fight," Olson said.

She also remembers holding the Marine's Purple Heart. It was the first time she had seen the medal up close. It especially struck home for her when she found out that he was her age.

"You don't realize the impact of those who are injured until you actually see it firsthand. The nurses on those planes were incredible. They would go above and beyond to help their patients and make us as comfortable as possible throughout the flights. They weren't helping us just because we were patients; it was because we were their brothers and sisters in arms. I will never forget that," Olson said.

The stories of the patients on the plane ranged from tragic to funny, Olson said. She chuckled as she described her interaction with a Soldier: "When I asked him why his leg was in a cast, he said, 'you know, Humvees ... well, they shouldn't be taken off-roading.'"

After several days of flight, Olson finally landed at Lackland Air Force Base in San

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Antonio, Texas. Her parents, (retired Master Sgt.) Gordy Olson and Sheila Olson, were at the base to greet her.

"Once my mom saw me she was able to deal with it a lot better," Olson said. Living in a military family, her mom was accustomed to the risks of deployments. "She was ready for me to come home missing a limb or even worse, but she wasn't ready for me to come home with cancer. She wasn't prepared for me to have to fight for my life in the U.S."

The Cancer Lottery

Hodgkin's Lymphoma has a 95 percent recovery rate and typically affects people in their early 20s to early 40s. Olson describes that acquiring this type of cancer is like winning the "cancer lottery" because of its high success rate.

"It affects the lymph nodes all over your body. Unlike other cancers, like breast cancer, you can't just cut out the abnormal cells because the lymph nodes are all connected together. If you take out one cancerous lymph node, it will just come back. The only way to treat it is through chemo," Olson said.

The normal military procedure was

for Olson to be treated at Lackland AFB over a six-month time-period. Olson wanted to come back to North Dakota for her treatment, and her Happy Hooligan family fought to get her home.

"I went to high school in Virginia, but my dad who spent most of his military career with the Happy Hooligans, talked me into moving to North Dakota and joining the Air Guard. Now, I'm so glad I did because it was unprecedented what the Wing did for me. They fought to get me here, to get me home for treatment," she said.

Olson explained that Airmen like Senior Master Sgt. Mike Anders, of the 119th Wing Medical Group, pleaded her case by explaining that much of her treatment depends on her attitude and how she can handle the stress. Anders and others said that she would recover faster if she could come home and work at the base among her fellow Hooligans between chemo treatments.

The diligence paid off. Olson was approved to come home. She began her chemo treatments on July 9, 2009, at the Roger Maris Cancer Center in Fargo, N.D.

Treatment

Hodgkin's Lymphoma spreads fast. Often, people who have this type of cancer do not display any physical signs until it has progressed to stage three or four, meaning that it is in multiple areas of the body.

"I was lucky, because I had the noticeable lump on my shoulder. I also had a cancer spot in my chest that I was completely unaware of. Even though we caught my cancer right away, I was still already at stage two," Olson said.

Although each case is treated uniquely based on the individual, typically patients up to 20 years old, which was Olson's age at the time, are placed in the pediatric ward for treatment. That's where she met her doctor, the man who would help her through the next several months with laughter and support.

"One of the first things Dr. Kobrinski told me was, 'The object of the game is to kill the cancer before the poison (chemo treatment) kills you. But I'm really good at this, so don't worry.' He was funny from the start," Olson said.

Olson described how the actual day she received the chemo treatments she felt fine. It was about a week later that the effects on her body showed.

"The drugs are literally fighting cell regeneration and that is why your hair falls out and your fingernails stop growing," Olson said. "But on the plus side, I didn't have to



Senior Airman Theta Olson used a positive attitude, humor and the love from family and friends like her father to overcome cancer. Courtesy photo.

shave my legs for months and it cleared up my complexion,” she joked.

At one point, Olson was on 19 different medications and going in for chemo treatments several days a week. She explained that she learned a great deal about herself throughout the entire process — how a person reacts to the different drugs and situations, physically and emotionally. She also appreciated the support from her friends, family and coworkers at the Wing.

“There were days when I was so tired that I would sleep 20 hours. It took everything I had to pull myself out of bed to eat,” Olson said. “I wanted to work to keep myself busy, but knowing that on the rough days that I didn’t have to go into work if I didn’t feel up to it was a huge relief.”

Through it all, she did her best to keep her sense of humor and stay positive.

“Sure, there were sad moments. At first, I was really angry at the cancer, at my situation. But it’s hard to stay mad when you’re sitting in pediatrics next to a happy, bald 3-year-old who is getting chemo with you,” she said.

Olson continued the treatment and was shocked by the outstanding support she received. Within her own squadron, she found comfort in the fact that two Airmen she works with recently overcame their own battles with cancer.

“By the time I was getting treatment, both of my coworkers were in remission. Knowing that they had fought this battle and won was a constant reminder that I would be

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okay too,” said Olson.

She also described the Comfort Shawl and Burden Bear that she received from the Enlisted Association. Rosie Clemenson, wife of Chief Master Sgt. Jim Clemenson and mother to Master Sgt. Erik E. Clemenson and Capt. Justin J. Clemenson, both of the 119th Wing, nominated her for the items.

“I didn’t think I would at first, but I did use the Comfort Shawl and every time I looked at that bear it would remind me of all the people who were thinking and praying for me. When you have that much support, you know you’re not going to fall,” she said.

Another supporter, Olson’s boyfriend, Senior Airman Adam Morine, a fellow Happy Hooligan, who deployed to Iraq in January of 2009, kept in contact with her throughout her treatment. She knew he was a keeper when after he saw her for the first time without any hair via video feed, he said, ‘Wow, you look hot bald!’ Olson laughed, “I told him he had been in Iraq too long.”

Shortly after her boyfriend’s return

home in August, Olson was asked to come to the center to see Dr. Kobrinski. She didn’t know what to expect, she only knew that he wanted to see her right away. She brought her boyfriend along for moral support.

“I was nervous. I didn’t know why he wanted to see me. I’m an optimistic person, but I also work in emergency management, so I’m envisioning and trying to prepare myself for the worst-case scenario,” Olson said.

Dr. Kobrinski soon calmed her fears and told her the wonderful news that her cancer was in remission. She was cancer-free after just two cycles, two months sooner than expected.

Olson laughed. “Adam came home on a Tuesday and I was in remission by Friday, now that’s a good week!”

At Morine’s return home celebration the following week, people would say to Olson, “Oh you have cancer and Adam would quickly correct them and say, ‘No, she HAD cancer. It’s gone!’ It was a good day,” Olson said.

Timing is everything

After Olson went into remission, she went through two more rounds of chemo as a safety precaution, which is typical. Through it all, her thoughts often drifted back to the desert where she was first diagnosed.

“Half your heart is in the desert and half your heart is here. So when the Airmen I served with came home in October, about the time I finished my last round of chemo, it was good closure for me,” Olson said.

Life is getting back to normal. Her spunk and humor are still in check. She’s back at North Dakota State University finishing her double major in emergency management and sociology.

“I tried to get a note from Dr. Kobrinski for no homework, but he refused,” Olson chuckled. “But I still think he’s an amazing doctor.”

It seems that the doctor who stood outside Olson’s barracks that unforgettable day in Germany and confirmed that she had cancer was also correct that she would begin an incredible journey. Without a doubt, Olson had the journey of a lifetime in 2009, a year she will never forget.

“On New Year’s Eve I was thinking about everything that has happened throughout the year. Winning Airman of the Year, my Kuwait deployment and I beat cancer ... yeah; it’s been quite a year. It’s been a really good year,” Olson said.

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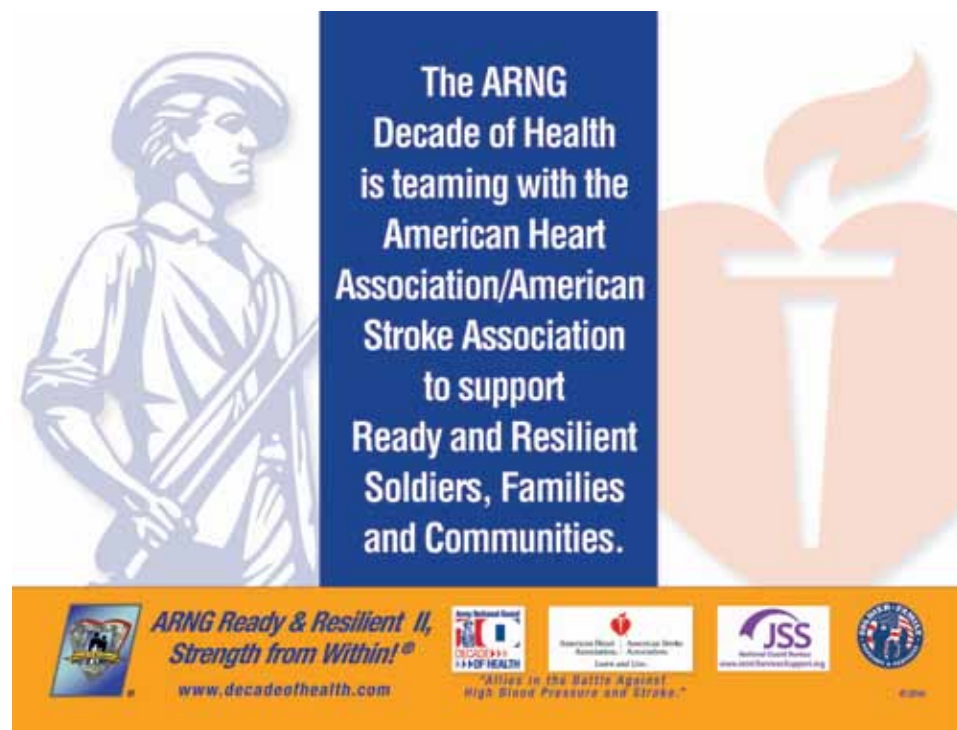
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